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THE DRIFTWOOD HARP

BY WINIFRED WELLES

It was a peaceful world we knew,
Small as a green bowl under the blue
Filmy circle of five hills—

 We had
Little wisdom to make us sad.
Dreams fared no further than the rim
Of the horizon and there grew dim
With day, and their fire would slide
Back into dark on the home side.

Save for the shudder a lizard breeze
Drew now and then from tall palm trees,
All life and all leafage dreamed.
Deep in the ferns the houses gleamed
With sleepy, tousled roofs, and seemed
Less like graceless shelters and more
The backgrounds for each open door,
Where groping babes grew brown as roots,
And nodding, old men dried like fruits,
And women yawned in the still sun
Over bright weaving that never was done.

In that little land of great content,
No one hour struck, no high event
Clattered or billowed along the way
Tomorrow took from yesterday.
Dawn slanted into the same twilight
Over and over.

 There was no white,
Wonderful weariness to keep
Men from their usual, gradual sleep,
No loneliness, no smiting mood,
Nor any hunger, save for food.

Now here I grew, and here grew
My strange driftwood harp too,

Shaped like a fanciful, flying wing,
Of dark wood and bright string,
A beautiful though battered thing,
That never the softest breath stirred
But through its gold bones still was heard
The sorrow of a great, lost bird.

And when I played it I would kneel,
For when I touched it I could feel
Under my hands the sting and start
Of a naked, living, bleeding heart.

There was a mystery in my song,
Its trouble and beauty did not belong
To any thing that I had seen.
There were no words for the near, green
Snarled reality under my eyes,
No monotone for those smooth skies;
But rhythm out of the harp would be
Sucked up and broken over me;
And drenched and breathlessly my cries
Up from the fragments would arise
In love of a longing I named the sea!

But none who heard me understood
Nor seemed to find my singing good.
They told me only a mad fool
Could conjure up this crinkled, cool,
Level mirage and claim it true,
When anyone could see that blue
Was taut and brazen like the sky,
Or a hill, immovable and high
While water certainly stood sweet
Green in a circle at one's feet,
Or narrowed from rocks in white strips.
And as for whims like shells or ships—
They turned away and curled their lips!

Who would have dreamed that the king's son
Would be the first enkindled one
To listen and long, and wave his hand,
And turn his face from his father's land?
Then youth and youth flamed after him
To the dark height and over its rim,
Like star after vanishing star,
Till they wore a path as white as a scar!

Oh long and long the old men yearned
But the young men never returned—
So they cut off my hands and tongue and burned
My harp. The tall, straight strings

Raveled and shriveled to thin black rings,
And the multicolored skeins of fire
That twisted up from the grey pyre,
Were the stained swords that put out my sight
Forever—

I had no light
For the king's son when he came home,
But his stinging words were a glitter of foam
On my bleak silence, his swift wrath
Sped in a golden, arrowy path
Over my waste—

And what I had grieved
And gladdened and died for they all believed
At last.

When the king's son was through
Giving the truth to my dreams, he drew
From his silver robe a carved, blue
Vessel of water, that those who still
Were in doubt could sip to their fill.
Mists of song I had spread for their drouth,
But a little, bitter taste in the mouth
Was their first drink of faith.

They sighed
Over the dust of my harp and tried
To find the strings, but the king's son cried
For my own wounds, and carried me
Over the hill to the healing sea.

WINIFRED WELLES.